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Envious Enemies of the Cross of Christ (Philippians 3:18)

DAVID E. FREDRICKSON

MAKING THE SIMPLE COMPLEX AND THE COMPLEX SIMPLE

At a climactic moment in Philippians, Paul speaks about enemies of the cross of Christ: "For many are walking, about whom often I was speaking to you, but now also I say weeping, the enemies of the cross of Christ" (Phil 3:18).[1] For the most part professional interpreters have not been bothered by or even curious about the appearance of enemies at this point in the letter. They are satisfied that the word enemy signals opposition to Christ's humility. Karl Barth's authority has propelled us down this wrong path:

> And "the cross of Christ" is...the strongest expression for the radical opposition of Christian truth, not so much to moral license and the pursuit of earthly, sensual pleasure, as rather to the religious and ethical presumptuousness that seeks to achieve what man is utterly incapable of achieving, what can only be given to him in faith. Those who would seek to get around this barrier, who resist the power of Christ's resurrection that seeks to drive them into fellowship of his sufferings, who will *not* walk the way of poverty described in verses 4–14, the way of being for Christ's sake *not* holy, *not* righteous, *not* perfect—these are "enemies of the cross of Christ."[2]

[1]Translations of Philippians in this essay are my own.

[2]Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 40th anniversary ed., trans. James W. Leitch (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002) 113.

Contrary to the common understanding, the "enemies of the cross of Christ" in Phil 3:18 are the same people who "proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry" in 1:15. These "enemies" want Paul's fame, but not the suffering that is built into loving.

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I believe that many Pauline scholars have been mistaken about the meaning of Jesus' death. They have followed Barth's assertion that the cross simultaneously shows God's condemnation of humanity's desire for self-transcendence and also illustrates what human life could and should be—voluntary submission to God.[3] I will have something to say about another way of conceptualizing the cross of Christ at the end of this essay. But for now it is enough to observe that the characterization of Christ's cross as an example of humility allows interpreters to slide past Paul's complex use of the word enemy. Enmity in their view, like Barth's, simply means opposition to Christ's humility, to God's sovereignty, and to Paul's apostolic authority.

A more complex picture emerges when the enemies of Christ's cross are imagined in the context of the entire letter. But this move is not without its own problems. The word enemy only occurs in 3:18. If we go back to 1:15 we do in fact discover a set of opponents, enemies in a generic sense, but it is a *very* unpopular view among Pauline scholars to think that the Christian missionaries of 1:15 who preach and proclaim Christ are the same as the enemies of the cross of Christ of 3:18. How could one set of missionaries be both preachers of the cross and its despisers? How could those in 1:15 who proclaim Christ also be the dogs, evil workers, mutilators, belly worshipers, and, worst of all, the enemies of Christ's cross?[4]

> ***"How could one set of missionaries be both preachers of the cross and its despisers?"***

Seeking to account for the different enemies Paul faces throughout the epistle, some scholars have suggested that Philippians is a compilation of letter fragments. In this view, Paul carried on his warfare on several fronts in separate writings. An editor of the second century, it is hypothesized, combined the pieces to make what we know today as Philippians. Seems unlikely, but even if such a radical solution to the problem of diversity is not accepted, the weight of opinion is still heavily in favor of distinct opponents. Interpreters generally acknowledge the problem that multiple enemies create for a smooth reading of the letter, and then they move on with remarkably smooth readings of the letter. All of this means that if we were to imagine a unified opposition to Paul, supposing that he composed the letter from start to finish as we have it, we most likely would be accused of squaring a circle. This would be a fair criticism, of course, unless we could show that there is a unifying conceptual thread running through the letter, obvious to original read-

[3]The title alone of a recent monograph is a reminder of the immense influence that neoorthodox themes have had in Pauline scholarship. See M. Sydney Park, *Submission within the Godhead and the Church in the Epistle to the Philippians: An Exegetical and Theological Examination of the Concept of Submission in Philippians 2 and* 3 (London: T & T Clark, 2007). For a fresh interpretation of Phil 2:5–11 that avoids the neoorthodox lens, see L. Michael White, "Morality between Two Worlds: A Paradigm of Friendship in Philippians," in *Greeks, Romans, and Christians: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe*, ed. David L. Balch, Everett Ferguson, and Wayne A. Meeks (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 201–215.

[4]For the problem of opponents in Philippians, see Jerry L. Sumney, *"Servants of Satan," "False Brothers" and Other Opponents of Paul* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999) 160–187.

ers but unrecognized by us because of our unfamiliarity with the ancient world or, and this is equally likely, because of our need to make Paul speak in modern (neoorthodox) categories. There is just such a thread. It is the ancient notion of envy. What appears to us as disjointed references to behaviors and people that displease Paul are in fact the intellectual architecture of the ancient understanding of one very bad emotion, envy.

Envy's Vicious Companions

The most telling comment Paul makes about his opponents is what he says first. They are envious. "Some on account of envy (φθόνον) and strife...preach Christ" (1:15). Before I trace envy's alter egos through the letter, I should point out that this emotion had a different feel for the ancients than it has for us. We emphasize that aspect of envy which desires to possess what someone else has, while the envious person in antiquity wished even more that the possessor be stripped of the valued object. This evil wish turned the envious person into an enemy. To be an enemy of someone or something through the power of envy meant that you wanted what they had and wanted very much that they not have it.

> The terms [for envy] *phthonos* and *baskania*, with their Latin counterparts *invidia* and *livor*, refer essentially to a state best characterized as one of grudging....The wish to see the other deprived of these goods is implicit in the notion of grudging; the *phthoneros* therefore looks with ill-will upon the object of his *phthonos*. He is therefore regularly thought of and spoken of as malicious, and having a bent for evil. To judge from the frequency with which *phthonos* and the terms that we rather inadequately render by "hatred" and "enmity" are found together in Greek, it was widely assumed that the ill-will of *phthonos* was likely to be intense; "hatred" and "enmity" are inadequate precisely because they lack the element of active ill-will that is built into δυσμενεία [ill-will] and ἐχθρά [enmity]. The *phthoneros*, then, in his ἐχθρά not only dislikes the object of his *phthonos*, but wishes actively to see him harmed.[5]

Ancient envy can not be explained adequately without enmity. Basil, classically educated Christian theologian of the fourth century, stood in a long line of poets, orators, and philosophers reaching back to Homer, Pindar, Isocrates, and Plato, all of whom would assent to his contention that "envy is the most difficult form of enmity to manage."[6]

What follows in this essay is a reading of Philippians that organizes itself around the topic of envy. I will show the bad company envy kept when it wasn't otherwise occupied with enmity in 3:18. As I mentioned before, Paul gets envy on

[5]Katherine M. D. Dunbabin and M. W. Dickie, "*Invidia Rumpantur Pectora*: The Iconography of *Phthonos/Invidia* in Graeco-Roman Art," *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 26 (1983) 10.

[6]Basil, *Homilia de invidia* 31.376. For the tight connection between envy and enmity in Pindar, who more than anyone else established the ancient world's discourse about envy, see Patricia Bulman, *Phthonos in Pindar* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) 25, 53, 65. See also *Testament of Simeon* 4:7–9; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 3.9.3–4; cf. 3.28.5; Plutarch, *How to Profit by One's Enemies* 86B–C; *On Envy and Hate* 536 E–F; Dio Chrysostom, *Oration* 31.99; Aelius Aristides, *Oration* 12.37; Apollonius of Tyana, *Epistle* 43.

the table in 1:15 and mentions the first of its companions, strife: "Some on account of envy (φθόνον) and strife (ἔριν)...preach Christ."[7] Soon after, we learn of another of envy's bad associates, selfish ambition.[8] Paul reproduces this connection in 1:17 where the envious missionaries "from selfish ambition proclaim Christ." A first-century audience might have thought that envy was implied also in 2:3 in Paul's warning against "selfish ambition and vainglory." Paul hits this note of selfishness yet two more times, first in 2:4 ("each not looking to one's own things") and then in 2:21 ("all are seeking their own interests").

The ancients also saw an important relationship between envy on the one hand and both deceptive and abusive speech on the other.[9] The following phrases might be Paul's way of connecting his envious opponents to deceptive speech: "supposing to arouse affliction at my bonds" (1:17) and "in pretense (προφάσει)...Christ is proclaimed" (1:18).[10] Deceptive speech is closely related to the kind of enmity Paul's hearers might have thought of in response to Paul's phrase "enemies of the cross of Christ."[11] As for the blaming and abusive speech, which the ancients thought also flowed from envy, we find evidence in 2:14 ("without muttering and arguing") and 2:15 ("twisted and perverse generation.")[12] Envy not only contorted the human body but turned it bestial in behavior as well, and ironically this transformation occurred in respect to speech, a capability the other animals do not possess.[13] An onslaught of references to envy-inspired abusive speech in 3:2 prepares Paul's readers for his depiction of opponents as enemies of Christ's cross: "Beware the dogs" and "Beware the mutilation."[14] Finally, 3:18 makes Paul's point one

[7]For the pairing of envy with strife, see Bulman, *Phthonos*, 53–63; Gregory Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) 309–316; Suzanne Saïd, "Envy and Emulation in Isocrates," in *Envy, Spite and Jealousy: The Rivalrous Emotions in Ancient Greece*, ed. David Konstan and N. Keith Rutter (Edinburgh; Edinburgh University Press, 2003) 231–232. See also Pseudo-Phocylides, *Sentences* 70; Aelius Aristides, *Oration* 23.40.

[8]Bulman, *Phthonos*, 6–8, 24–27. See also Isocrates, *On the Peace* 12–13, 93; *Philippus* 73.

[9]The vice list in Rom 1:29 is typical of the way envy and insincere speech were linked.

[10]How exactly is 1:17 an allusion to deceptive speech? The Greek text (οἰόμενοι θλῖψιν ἐγείρειν τοῖς δεσμοῖς μοῦ) has two nuances very difficult to bring into English. First, the diphthong which begins and ends οἰόμενοι is a vocalization employed in disturbing repetition at the beginning of the traditional lament for the dead. The second nuance also pertains to ritualized mourning. The verb ἐγείρειν designated the purpose of the lament—to arouse or to stimulate in the living the emotions commensurate with the destruction of the loved one. It appears that Paul's opponents are far too eager to lament his death. He returns the insult in 3:18. We know from Plutarch (*On Envy and Hate* 538C) that just such a predilection for lamenting dead, successful people was a characteristic of the envious person. So much for the nuances of 1:17. The way 1:18 refers to deceptive speech is obvious, but it is worth noting the long history that pretense and envy share with one another. See Bulman, *Phthonos*, 45–49; Andrew Miller, "*Phthonos* and *Parphasis*: The Argument of *Nemean* 8.19–34," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 23 (1982) 116–120; Michelle Zerba, "Love, Envy, and Pantomimic Morality in Cicero's *De Oratore*," *Classical Philology* 97 (2002) 301–305.

[11]This association goes back to Homer, *Iliad* 9.312–313. See Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans*, 52–58.

[12]Bulman, *Phthonos*, 6–7, 23; Dunbabin and Dickie, "*Invidia Rumpantur Pectora*," 17–27; Vasiliki Limberis, "The Eyes Infected By Evil: Basil of Caesarea's Homily, On Envy," *Harvard Theological Review* 84 (1991) 171. See also Isocrates, *Antidosis* 62; *Evagoras* 6; *Helen* 30; Demosthenes, *De Corona* 315–317; Philostratus, *Lives of the Sophists* 514–515; Plotinus, 1.6.26–30.

[13]Bulman, *Phthonos*, 27–28, 31; Isocrates, *Antidosis* 142–143; Nick Fisher, "'Let Envy Be Absent': Envy, Liturgies and Reciprocity in Athens," in Konstan and Rutter, *Envy, Spite and Jealousy*, 181–215.

[14]The envious behaving like dogs (barking, biting, mutilating): Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans*, 222–231,

more time: the opponents' envy makes them self-seeking and wanton, vainglorious, and petty-minded, or, in Paul's words, the envious are those "whose god is the belly, whose reputation is in their shame, who are thinking earthly things" (3:19).[15]

One last companion of envy. Researchers pursuing sociologically oriented approaches to ancient literature have pointed out the strong correlation between envy and competitive social relations.[16] Envy finds its natural home in an agonistic culture in which elites vie for limited goods, most notably honor. Ancient authors were themselves aware of this connection, although they did not use social-scientific language to describe it. Men of aristocratic families understood life through the metaphor of athletic struggle. The language of athletic competition is associated with the opponents in 1:28 ("those opposed") and in 1:30 ("having the same struggle"). Perhaps the most popular idea about envy in Paul's day was the notion that those who compete for reputation and other goods while grudging the success of others condemn themselves to sure and certain destruction, since envy, like rust corroding iron, destroys the agent from within.[17] We see the emphasis on the inevitable destruction of the envious in 1:28 ("which is a display of destruction to them") and 3:19 ("whose end is destruction").

An Unusual End to the Usual Story

With the help of envy and its vicious companions we are now ready to wrap our minds around the idea that those who preach Christ (1:15) are the same set of opponents whom Paul later calls enemies of Christ's cross (3:18). The first thing we learn from noticing envy's relatedness to other sins is that the we/they dichotomy, so often associated with enmity in present-day usage, is too simple when applied to ancient texts. Here is the reason. Envy, the ancients thought, only occurred between fellow workers, compatriots, friends, or professional associates. Hesiod (about 700 B.C.E.) would have had no trouble imaging this situation. His observation about the rivalry between workers in the same trade was often quoted in Paul's day and after in discussions of envy: "And potter is angry with potter, and craftsman with craftsman, and beggar is jealous (φθονέει) of beggar, and minstrel of minstrel."[18] In this framework, enmity born of envy arises from closeness and com-

312–313; Margaret Graver, "Dog-Helen and Homeric Insult," *Classical Antiquity* 14 (1995) 41–61; Bulman, *Phthonos*, 12–13, 44–45, 54–56; Deborah Steiner, "Slander's Bite: *Nemean* 7.102–105 and the Language of Invective," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 121 (2001) 156–157. See also Dio Chrysostom, *Oration* 77/78.29; Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses* 258.

[15]For the possible background of ὧν ὁ θέος ἡ κοιλία ("whose God is the belly"), see Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans* 229–231, 260–261; Margaret Graver, "Dog-Helen and Homeric Insult," 47. For ἡ δόξα ἐν αἰσχύνῃ αὐτῶν ("whose reputation is their shame"), see Demosthenes, *Against Leptines*, 139–142; Philostratus, *Lives of the Sophists* 490–491, 514–515. For οἱ τὰ ἐπίγεια φρονοῦντες, see Isocrates, *Evagoras* 6; Plotinus, 1.6.26–30.

[16]Limberis, "The Eyes Infected By Evil," 169–175.

[17]Artistic representation of envy focuses entirely on this theme. See Dunbabin and Dickie, "*Invidia Rumpantur Pectora*," 19–27.

[18]Hesiod, *Works and Days* 25–26. See also Dio Chrysostom, *Oration* 77/78.2–6; Aristides, *Oration* 32.9–11; Lucian, *Slander* 2; Philostratus, *Lives of the Sophists* 490–491. See also Suzanne Saïd, "Envy and Emulation in Isocrates," 218.

monality.[19] Ancient writers of professional ethics in various fields demanded of their practitioners that they not fall victim to Hesiod's dismal insight. Hippocrates, for example, regarded envy as a temptation to be resisted rather than a fate to be expected and endured: "Physicians who meet in consultation must never quarrel, or jeer at one another. For I will assert upon oath, a physician's reasoning should never be jealous (φθονήσειεν) of another."[20] From the ancient perspective, then, Paul could only call enemies those who share in his kind of work. This explains why Paul emphasizes labor (τὸ ἔργον) in the letter. From his own work in 1:5 ("the one who began in you good work") to the activity of the rival missionaries in 3:2 ("Beware the bad workers") the letter asks readers to think of the situation between Paul and his opponents as competition between practitioners of the same craft.[21]

"What provoked envy among ancient workers in the same field? The answer is not surprising: success, public recognition, and praise."

What provoked envy among ancient workers in the same field? The answer is not surprising: success, public recognition, and praise. If your labor resulted in progress and prosperity, you would surely soon find yourself the target of envy. That was the common wisdom.[22] Throughout the letter Paul imagines that praise and recognition are his now and in store for him later as a result of his labor (1:13; 1:26; 3:3–4; 3:8–10; 3:14).[23] It thus makes sense, from an ancient perspective at least, that he emphasizes his success even more by portraying himself as the victim of envy.

Although the usual story can be detected in the archaic poets and the tragedians, the orators of the fifth and fourth centuries develop it further. Note the intriguing terminological parallels with Philippians that we find in the opening of a speech by Lysias (459–380? B.C.E.):

> I can almost find it in me to be grateful to my accuser, gentlemen of the Council, for having involved me in these proceedings (τὸν ἀγῶνα). For previously I had no excuse (πρόφασιν) for rendering an account (λόγον) of my life; but now, owing to this man, I have got one. So I will try to show you in my speech that this man is lying, and that my own life until this day has been deserving of praise (ἐπαίνου) rather than envy (φθόνου); for it is merely from envy (διὰ φθόνον), in my opinion, that he has involved me in this ordeal. But I ask you, if a man envies (φθονεῖ) those whom other people pity, from what villainy do you think such a person would refrain? Is it possible that he hopes to get money by slander-

[19]If you have lived in a small town, you will have no trouble grasping this point.

[20]Hippocrates, *Precepts* 8 (trans. Loeb Classical Library).

[21]For other instances of labor, see 1:22; 2:21; 2:25; 2:30; 4:3.

[22]See *Testament of Gad* 4:5–7; Plutarch, *On Envy and Hate* 537A–F; Dio Chrysostom, *Oration* 43.1–2; Lucian, *Slander*, 12. The experience of envy, both having it and being its victim, seemed to follow a prepared script. See Robert Kaster, *Emotion, Restraint, and Community in Ancient Rome* (London: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[23]To this list we might add 1:11 if we accept the reading of Papyrus 46: "to the glory of God and praise for me."

> ing me? And if he makes me out an enemy (ἐχθρὸν) on whom he seeks to be avenged, he lies; for his villainy has always kept me from having any dealings with him either as a friend (φίλῳ) or as an enemy (ἐχθρῷ). So now, gentlemen, it is clear that he envies (φθονῶν) me because, although I have to bear this sore misfortune, I am a better citizen than he is.[24]

Like Paul in Philippians, orators frequently followed Lysias and portrayed themselves (or the persons they represented) as victims of envy. They explained this unfortunate circumstance as the result of their own accomplishments. In short, to claim that one was envied and to speak about enemies attacking the values in which one excelled—all of this was a method of indirect self-praise.

Now why would Paul praise himself, even indirectly? To get at the answer we have to go back to the beginning of this essay and my criticism of Karl Barth's reading of Phil 3:18, since this understanding of the cross has been so influential and since it obscures, I think, the meaning of the cross. For Barth the cross is a "barrier" that its enemies seek to "get around."[25] I have argued elsewhere for an understanding of Jesus' death in terms quite distant from Barth's reduction of God and humans to Subject and objects. I think that for Paul the cross was the ultimate expression of Christ's longing for humanity.[26] If this is correct, then to be at enmity with the cross of Christ is to despise longing, to think it an unworthy emotion in the Son of God. But Paul, who recommends Timothy and Epaphroditus (2:19–30) and Euodia and Syntyche (4:2–3) for leadership roles within the community, claims that his longing for the church (1:8) is his chief value as an apostle, the basis of his self-praise and the praise he has for his coworkers, and, as unlikely as this may have seemed to them, the reason why he is envied by the opponents. Paul boasts about himself in the usual story but in an unusual way. He is famous, illustrious, and successful... in his longing for the church. The enemies of the cross of Christ want the fame Paul claims he enjoys, but they don't want the suffering that is built into loving. They preach Christ but not in a holy way. ⊕

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[24]Lysias, *Oration* 24.1–3 (trans. Loeb Classical Library); cf. Dio Chrysostom, *Oration* 77/78.15–26. Envy was such a force to be reckoned with that even Isocrates, famous maker of well-turned speeches from the same era, withdrew from public speaking (a somewhat self-contradictory dodge) to avoid the jealousy his fine verbal products inspired. See Philostratus, *Lives of the Sophists* 505.

[25]The translator's note on "barrier" (p. 113, note 51) is illuminating: "*Grenzpfahl*, lit. boundary post: the cross is here likened to a post or pole that stands, like a 'halt sign' at the frontier, to mark the limit of human endeavor."

[26]See "The Kenosis of Christ in the Politics of Paul," in the *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* (http://www.elca.org/jle/article.asp?k=517).